



eccv

AUSTRALIAN POPULATION GROWTH AND IMMIGRATION POSITION PAPER

February 2010

Introduction

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (eccv) was established in 1974 and is a broadly based, state-wide, peak advocacy body representing 186 ethnic and multicultural communities in Victoria. ECCV advocates and lobbies all levels of government as well as delivers policy projects on behalf of multicultural communities in areas including access and equity, aged care services, migration services, discrimination, community harmony, employment, education and training, health and community services, law and justice, and arts and culture. Eccv's role includes supporting, consulting, liaising with and providing information to Victoria's ethnic communities.

Eccv is the principal liaison point between ethnic communities, government and the wider community in Victoria and has been a key player in building Victoria as a successful, harmonious and multicultural community.

Background

Recent research suggests Australia's population will reach 35 million by 2049, a significantly higher figure than the previously estimated 28.5 million. Whilst Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has welcomed a 'big Australia', this projected population increase has sparked debate and criticism. In particular, concerns with regard to the pressure this will place on the environment, economy, housing, health and education services, infrastructure, roads and public transport and natural resources has arisen. That is to say, ensuring population growth does not occur to the detriment of the quality of Australian life.

The debate regarding Australia's population is two-fold. Firstly, there is the question relating to the desired total population, where population is determined by fertility rates, mortality rates and immigration numbers. Since achieving the target population size is most readily attained by controlling immigration numbers, the second issue relates to Australia's annual immigration intake. Australia's immigration policy strives to both benefit Australia's economy and ensure its international human rights obligations are met. Skilled migration is typically associated with the former whilst refugee and family reunion migrants relate to the latter, namely the right of people to live with their close family. Family reunion also assists people to settle more effectively.

Many of the economic and social concerns raised fail to recognize the profoundly positive social, economic and cultural impact immigrants have made to Australia. Economic concerns generally relate to the increased cost to social welfare and the strain to certain industries such as education and health. Yet immigrants have contributed enormously to Australia's economic prosperity and growth and without immigration the labour force participation rate, a key indicator of economic growth and welfare, would stagnate. Their contribution will become even more crucial since the average life expectancy is increasing and Australia's birth rate is below replacement levels, Australia is facing an ageing population coupled with a skills shortage meaning we will be facing greater fiscal constraints. Furthermore, researchers have not found an increase in negative public attitudes towards immigration during the recent Global Financial Crisis as was the case during the 1980's and 1990's recessions.

Immigrants have also played a huge role in enhancing the cultural landscape of Australia, making it the richly diverse nation it is today. Other concerns pertain to inadequate infrastructure including roads, public transport and housing. Yet vacancy rates in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra have all increased, in Melbourne to 3.5%, indicating more efficient use of existing housing could be an initial remedy to the issue. The Commonwealth Government needs to ensure it plans, expands and improves infrastructure at the same level of the forecasted population growth to ensure the quality of Australian life is maintained.

Environmentalists are especially critical of such an increase in population, fearing it will cause resource depletion, land degradation, further strain on water availability, and make it even more difficult to reduce Australia's green house gas emissions to combat climate change. However an

increase in immigration is not incompatible with environmental improvements. This can be achieved by working collectively to adopt better environmental practices and develop stronger environmental policies. Indeed future immigration is predicted to arise as a result of climate change.

Due to the debate surrounding Australia's population growth, eccv outlines the following principles for our immigration and population policy. These recommendations do not seek to prescribe specific numbers and detail around our immigration and/or population levels. Rather these are an outline of the key principles that eccv believes the Australian Government should consider when forming its immigration and population policies.

Eccv Australian Population and Immigration Policy Principles:

1. Eccv believes that the quality of life must be taken into account when discussing issues of population growth.
2. Eccv recognizes that the annual intake of immigrants is a key factor of population growth.
3. Eccv supports the continuation of a sustainable immigration program incorporating appropriately balanced workforce, family reunion and refugee components.
4. All immigrants should be given access to appropriate settlement, training, employment, housing, welfare, health, mentoring and other human services following their arrival in Australia. This promotes social inclusion and therefore supports human capital development and hence productivity and participation. For example improving provision & access of Adult Migrant English language programs is an investment that will increase migrant participation in the workforce, education, training & community life.
5. Eccv believes a government funded Population and Multicultural Research Body should be revived to consider these issues more deeply, utilising a much more sophisticated and thorough research and knowledge base.
6. The level of skilled migration is ultimately a matter for the government of the day based on Australia's changing economic needs, current skills shortages and wider resourcing issues.

7. Eccv believes the family reunion program and the refugee program should be exempted from any cuts to the immigration program and these programs should be increased as proportions of the total immigration program since these relate to core human rights.

8. Research indicates that despite the recent Global Financial Crisis, positive public perception toward immigration has remained.

9. Eccv acknowledges the significant impact immigrants have had on Australia's economic growth.

19. Despite recent small increases in fertility rates Australia's birth rate remains below replacement levels and we still have a rapidly ageing population and with ongoing skills and labour market shortages. This means immigrants will be even more crucial to Australia's long-term economic prosperity.

11. Immigrants bring creativity, energy and enhance Australia's cultural landscape making it a diverse and dynamic nation.

12. Eccv believes that immediate infrastructure planning will enable Australia to sustain a responsible level of population growth.

13. More efficient use of existing housing will assist in accommodating a larger population.

14. Eccv believes that the Australian population needs to move towards more environmentally friendly practices at work and at home to minimise the effects of population growth on the environment. For instance, regardless of overall population levels, Australia cannot continue being one of the largest greenhouse gas emitting nations in the world per head of population.

15. Eccv supports the Federal Government's 'social inclusion agenda' outlined in the 2010 Intergenerational Report and encourages it to extend targeted services to ethnic communities.

ENDORSED BY ECCV 2010

For further information please contact eccv on 03 9349 4122